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State admits school grading flawed

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Florida's public school grades, highly anticipated by parents as a way to measure quality, are no longer an accurate barometer of how well or how poorly a school performs, the state admitted on Tuesday.

The grades, which also affect everything from teacher pay to property values, have become so diluted they no longer serve their intended goal – measuring a school's educational worth, the state said

So for the second straight year, no school will be permitted to drop more than one letter grade, possibly reducing the state's number of failing schools from 242 to 108, by one estimate.

School grades are due later this month and many A and B schools were expected to drop to a C or D because of tougher cutoff scores on the writing portion of the FCAT and mediocre performances in reading and math.

For some schools, it's a bigger save. For example, last year Glade View Elementary in Belle Glade would have fallen from an A to an F but only slid to a B because of the rule.

[Palm Beach County](#) school district spokesman Jason Shockley applauded the one-letter-drop decision, saying it "will help to maintain high standards and accountability, while also paving the way for a smooth transition to more rigorous standards over the next several years."

Broward Schools Superintendent Robert Runcie said the current system relies too much on arbitrary cutoff scores rather than student improvement. For example, last year the state increased the passing writing score from a 3 to a 3.5 out of a possible 6 – until the scores plummeted, and it returned to a 3. This year, it's going back up to a 3.5.

"Who's to say it shouldn't be a 3.2? What's the scientific logic where you put the [cutoff]?" he asked.

But Michael Woods, a teacher at Santaluces High School, west of Lantana, said this effort to fix the problems makes it hard to take Florida's school accountability system seriously.

"They should develop a valid system and let the chips fall where they may," he said. "It's not valid if you're artificially reporting school grades."

The state grades are important to schools, as they can affect enrollment. Teachers at schools that get As or

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show improvement are eligible for bonuses. They also can affect property values since many families look to move into neighborhoods with A-rated schools.

But the number of A schools in [Palm Beach County](#) has skyrocketed from 16 in 1999 to 102 last year. While some of that is due to better student performance, changes in the grading scale have also been a major factor, raising questions about whether an A school is always a top-performing school.

Many families are aware the criteria have changed and typically use a school's grade only as a starting point, said Michael Citron, a real estate agent in Broward and Palm Beach counties.

"They will delve a little deeper and look at school's reputation and go online to see different ratings and testimonials on websites," he said.

Education Commissioner Tony Bennett said the "safety net" of a one letter drop will be used as a transition plan until the state develops a more permanent grading system next year based on a new set of national standards called Common Core.

School grades historically have been based on the reading, writing and math portions of the FCAT, but in recent years the formula has included more subjects as well as graduation rates, end of course exams and other data.

"What began as a pure grading system, a pure measure, over time has become overly nuanced," said Bennett, adding he may recommend no more than a one letter drop next year, which is the last year FCAT will be used.

"I will hold fast this should not and cannot be part of the permanent accountability landscape," Bennett said.

Members of the Board of Education agreed the system is flawed, but had other ideas to fix it. Some wanted to overhaul the whole system, which Bennett said there was not enough time to do. One board member suggested issuing no grades at all this year, which Bennett said would be prohibited under state law.

Board member Sally Bradshaw argued the safety net amounted to grade inflation.

"I don't understand when it becomes acceptable to manipulate the truth just because the truth is uncomfortable, and that's what we're doing," she said.

Last year, the provision benefited 388 of the 2,513 schools evaluated.

Among those, 339 would have dropped an additional grade, 40 schools would have dropped two more letter grades and nine would have dropped three more letter grades.

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